

Critical Philosophy of Race: Beyond the USA

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The study of race and racism is an area of growth in philosophy. The quantity of research published under the banner of ‘the philosophy of race’ is increasing; research monographs and edited collections are appearing in greater numbers, and there is even a noticeable though still lamentably small increase in the number of professional positions being advertised in the philosophy of race. However, one notable feature of this research is how much it focuses upon the racial context of the USA. Most of its active and prominent researchers are based in the USA, nearly all new posts with designated research specialisms in race are at universities in the USA, and most of its key research questions are framed in the racial idiom and social context of the contemporary USA. In many respects, this is a good thing: if the philosophy of race cannot find fertile ground in the USA, there is little hope of it flourishing anywhere. However, this emphasis on the US context may have a negative side too. Let me elaborate.

We are, by now, more or less past the point where unrefined claims that race is a scientifically robust category are given any real credit. We have been quite clear, since the 1960s at least, that the most viable scientific counterparts for our ordinary race concepts do not offer any real likelihood of naturalistic reduction – race can neither be reduced to, nor explained by the concept of sub-species, for instance.¹ Even allowing for some recent philosophical engagement with the possibility of explaining race in terms of population clusters in genetics² it is quite clear that as it stands race is not a viable biological kind.³ What is also clear, however, is that race is real. It may not be explicable in terms of an underlying biological kind, but our lived experiences most certainly involve racial categories. As Robert Bernasconi notes,⁴ the biological question about race is in many ways simply a red herring – race is, and always has been, a political category.

The preferred explanation of the political reality of race is in terms of social construction – our practices of identifying and demarcating certain bodily markers, using them to organise people into particular racialised groups, and arranging various social, political and economic practices around those groups are what confers reality upon our racial categories. However, this might suggest that socially constructed races and racial categories are likely to vary: they vary across different societies, and they are mutable across time within societies; for that reason, paying disproportionate attention to the USA is likely to distort our understanding of the political reality of race.

Consider the fact that the construction of race and racial categories varies between the USA, Brazil, Haiti, South Africa, or the United Kingdom. Race in the USA, for instance, has been dominated for much of the recent past by a particular racial binary – ‘black’ and ‘white’ – and a series of segregationist and oppressive racial projects designed to police and enforce this separation of racial groups to the detriment of black Americans.⁵ By contrast, the Haitian racial division between ‘negres’, ‘mulatto’

and 'blancs' has standardly tied race much more closely with class. As Charles Mills notes,⁶ similar racial formations abide in Jamaica and have a profound influence on racial identity in that country. Of course, in the USA, race and class are deeply connected too – race places constraints on class. But in the Haitian and Jamaican contexts, class determines race much more strongly than race determines class.⁷ And if we look to Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia, China etc. we find further differences in the racial landscape, and variation in the forces that shape these formations. What this means is that race, in those different social contexts, takes on different nuances, different forms, and emerges from quite different types of social project.

Whilst race and racialisation in the context of contemporary USA are themselves deeply nuanced,⁸ and it is not necessarily a bad thing that much of our current discourse in the philosophy of race focuses on that context, two deep concerns emerge from the possibility that we are paying disproportionate attention to the USA.

First of all, we might be concerned that a strongly American focus in the philosophy of race affects our philosophical intuitions. Take, for instance, the recent growth in biological race realism that emerged from Noah Rosenberg's study of genetic clusters in human populations.⁹ Amongst those philosophers who have taken this research to support claims that some kind of race concept could be reduced to a viable biological category, there is the clear acknowledgement that the data would only support an American concept of racial formation.¹⁰ Similarly with philosophical research on how we should identify the ordinary, folk concept of race. Much of our research currently focuses quite narrowly on the modern American context – race is taken to have a non-negotiable somatic component that attends to common markers such as skin colour, facial characteristics, and so on, and is taken to be conferred upon us in a way that is fixed by our ancestry.¹¹ This drives related questions about the role that science plays in our understanding about the reality of race, or of how social constructivists might explain the way that individuals can pass for a different race.¹² However, if we broaden our gaze to racial formations from other places and other times, it's not obvious that these markers of race, nor the parameters on our questions about the reality of race, or the dilemma of passing are quite so central as the contemporary American experience of race seems to suggest.¹³ This is not to condemn all of the rich and important work that we find in current philosophy of race, but rather to suggest that we may be missing something if we do not look at race beyond the USA.

The second worry that motivates these articles is not so much one of how we might add nuance to the important philosophical research on race that already exists, but a concern with the effect upon the social context in which the philosophical study of race currently takes place. There are two elements to this: one is that it places unwanted constraints on the study of race outside of the USA; the other is that it places limitations on the study of race within the USA.

Looking outside of the USA, the current Americentrism of the subject creates a comfortable isolationism outside of America – since the philosophy of race is an American concern, let the Americans be concerned with it. This means there is no great urgency to address questions of race in philosophical contexts outside of the USA, and there may even be some resistance to treating work on race in such settings as philosophy at all. Robert Bernasconi notes¹⁴ that British philosophy displayed just such resistance towards Michael Dummett's work on race – his concern with logic,

language, metaphysics and mathematics was philosophical; his concern with race, rather like his concern with tarot or electoral systems, was merely a side-interest. Things are changing, but slowly and in a way that means the acceptable research themes of the philosophy of race are still dictated by the American context. A philosopher of race in the UK will still be expected to engage with race in terms of the American formation of racial identity, and against the background of presuppositions that emerge from the USA; but in a British context, this makes little sense. Rather a British study of race needs to shift focus to the peculiarities of racial construction in the cauldron of empire, colonialism and class, and this has to bring entirely different concerns about race and racism to the fore.

Turning to the second element, there is a social impact on the philosophy of race in the USA too. Comfortable parochialism about a subject can easily lead to the assumption that however serious the philosophical study of race may be in the American context, it will still remain little more than a niche specialty, a subject of local concern only. I would contend that this runs the serious risk of missing something important, and something quite central to how we might now begin to think of central areas of philosophical research. Just as landmark work by Miranda Fricker,¹⁵ amongst others, has helped to make social identity and the politics of knowledge much more salient in our reflections upon core epistemological concepts, its also quite clear that we are now at the cusp of new work in applied and non-ideal philosophy of language.¹⁶ Philosophy of race, just like feminism, should play a key role in this. It may strike some as a strong claim, but I would venture to say that it is not as heretical as it might initially seem to suggest that the Americentrism of current philosophy of race contributes to the kinds of disciplinary border policing that keeps philosophy of race at the margins of the discipline, rather than somewhere near the centre and helping to inform our best intuitions and theories in philosophy.

All of the foregoing is meant to suggest that consciously pushing our concerns with the philosophy of race beyond its currently heavy American focus would be a boon, both to the subject, and to the discipline. It would give us a greater insight and provide more nuance in those research questions that currently drive the philosophy of race; and it would help those trying to shake the philosophical study of race outside of the USA out of its dogmatic slumber. The articles in this special issue of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* make some important steps towards doing just that.

In his contribution, 'Better Dread (if Still Dead) than Red', Charles Mills uses the work of Jamaican writer John Hearne to introduce and examine the racial context of Jamaica, and Caribbean philosophy. Amongst the many contributions of Mills' article we find important additions to on-going debates about the nature of racial passing. Racial passing is simply the case where members of one race are able to pass as a different race, primarily in virtue of possessing (some of) the bodily markers of that different race. In the US context, this is ordinarily a matter of light skinned black Americans passing as white. However, as Mills explains, in Jamaica, the construction of race differs, and so too does the nature of racial passing. The socio-political context of intermediate racial categories presents a different 'brown dilemma', and makes the political dimensions of racial passing all the more salient.

In his contribution, 'Theorising and Exposing Institutional Racism in Britain', Robert Bernasconi examines the anti-racist work of Ann and Michael Dummett in the context of 1960s and 1970s United Kingdom. As Bernasconi notes, Ann and Michael

Dummett felt that the practical and political urgency of their anti-racist activism compelled them to bypass questions about the scientific credibility of race and focus instead upon the concept's political dimensions – 'biological arguments are not relevant when the real importance of "race", as now commonly understood, is not biological or scientific at all but political'. In Bernasconi's article, we see how the Dummetts' treatment of race as a political concept in the racial ferment of 1970s British society might lead us to adopt a different focus in our work on racism. For instance, we might do better in our understanding of institutional racism by turning to the work of Fanon or Sartre, and in turn improve our understanding of racist discourse by attending to its hidden nature.

The centrality of the social and political dimensions of race and racism are again apparent in Annabelle Lever's article, 'Democracy, Epistemology and the Problem of All-White Juries'. Lever examines the racial composition of juries in England and Wales, responding to Cheryl Thomas' recent research findings for the UK Department of Justice. Thomas found that there was no significant underrepresentation of racial minorities, despite the very high likelihood that a jury in England and Wales will be all white, on the grounds that juries did not appear to deliver racially biased verdicts. Lever argues that the ethics of jury selection should be influenced by multiple considerations about epistemic justice and descriptive representation. As she notes, concerns about the ethics of jury selection in England and Wales are especially pertinent to jury practice in the USA where jury selection includes race-based strikes and 'arguments designed expressly to mobilise racial prejudice and ignorance'.

Unlike Bernasconi and Lever, whose articles both make contributions to the philosophy of race from the British racial context, Marzia Milazzo's and George Hull's articles draw upon the racial context of South Africa. In 'On White Ignorance, White Shame, and Other Pitfalls in Critical Philosophy of Race', Milazzo discusses Samantha Vice's work on whiteness and white shame. As Milazzo discusses, Vice's article, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?',¹⁷ caused something of a spike in public outrage in South Africa when she framed the notion of white guilt and shame as moral damage and suggested that white South Africans should minimise their control of social and political discourse. This episode, Milazzo argues, shows important parallels between race in South Africa and the USA, but importantly, gives us deep insights into the philosophical study of whiteness as a whole. For Milazzo, the tendency of white philosophers of race to frame whiteness in terms of guilt, ignorance, and moral damage rather than in terms of white interest in maintaining the structures of white privilege is an abiding and problematic feature of contemporary work in the area.

In the final article in the special issue 'Black Consciousness as Overcoming Hermeneutical Injustice', George Hull uses recent work on epistemic injustice to defend the claims of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa, and the work of Steve Biko and Barney Pityana. For Hull, when we understand the arguments of the BCM through the lens of hermeneutical injustice – exclusion from collective social understanding – we can see why the anti-apartheid arguments of Biko and Pityana against the diminishing of black consciousness, collectivity, and self awareness remain relevant, even in a post-apartheid nation. For Hull, the damage done to collective black identity cannot be rectified by simply removing the symbolic and legal barriers of marginalisation.

All the articles in this special issue are interesting and valuable contributions to the philosophy of race in their own right. Racial passing and the 'brown dilemma' in

Jamaica, jury selection and the politics of racism in the United Kingdom, whiteness and hermeneutical injustice in South Africa are all independently important topics. However, that they offer a deepening of our understanding of the philosophy of race by adding perspectives from outside of the predominant American perspective further adds to their value. The philosophy of race is a rich and promising area of the discipline, and the contributions here show one way in which we must find room for alternative perspectives and different voices if that promise is to be realised.

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NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Richard Lewontin, 'The apportionment of human diversity', *Evolutionary Biology* 6 (1972): 381–98.
- 2 See, for instance, Quayshawn Spencer, 'Philosophy of race meets populations genetics', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 52 (2015): 46–55.
- 3 See, Adam Hochman, 'Against the new racial naturalism', *The Journal of Philosophy* 110,7 (2013): 331–351; or Albert Atkin, 'Race, definition, and science' in N. Zack (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 4 See his contribution to this special issue.
- 5 Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), gives the classic account of how race was constructed in the USA.
- 6 See his contribution to this special issue.
- 7 See Micheline Labelle, *Idéologie de Couleur et Classes Sociales en Haïti* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1978) for an account of racialization in Haiti; and Charles Mills' contribution to this symposium, 'Better dread (if still dead) than red,' for comment on the Jamaican racial context.
- 8 For example, there is clear evidence that it is unhelpful to understand race in the USA in terms of a simple 'black/white' binary, and that we need to pay much greater attention to the racialization of Hispanic and Latinx identities, and the mixed race experience. Tina Botts (ed.), *Philosophy and the Mixed Race Experience* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), for example, provides an excellent resource for understanding the relevance of the mixed race experience to questions in the philosophy of race.
- 9 See Noah Rosenberg *et al.*, 'Genetic structure of human populations', *Science* 298,5602 (2002): 2381–2385.
- 10 See Quayshawn Spencer, 'Philosophy of race meets populations genetics', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 52 (2015): 46–55 at pp. 46–7 for just such a qualification.
- 11 Both Michael Hardimon, 'The ordinary concept of race', *The Journal of Philosophy* 100,9 (2003): 437–55, and Albert Atkin, *The Philosophy of Race*. (London: Routledge, 2012) use such a framework to explain the 'folk' concept of race.
- 12 See Ron Mallon, 'Passing, travelling and reality: Social constructionism and the metaphysics of race', *Noûs* 38,4 (2004): 644–73.
- 13 See Charles Mills, 'Better dread (if still dead) than red', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, this issue.
- 14 See Robert Bernasconi 'Theorising and exposing institutional racism in Britain: The contribution of Ann and Michael Dummett to critical philosophy of race', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, this issue.
- 15 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 16 For good recent examples of the applied turn in the philosophy of language, see Jennifer Saul, 'Politically significant terms and philosophy of language: Methodological issues' in A. Superson & S. Crasnow (eds) *Out from the Shadows: Analytic Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 195–216; or Ishani Maitra & Mary Kate McGowan, *Speech and Harm: Controversies over Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 17 Samantha Vice, 'How do I live in this strange place?', *The Journal of Social Philosophy* 41,3 (2010): 323–342.